



GARDENING SOFTWARE

Summer may be drawing to an end but, says Mike Bedford, now is a good time to work on your garden – from the comfort of your PC

Alan Titchmarsh, Charlie Dimmock and Tommy Walsh are such familiar faces on our TV screens that you'd think the British are a nation of gardeners. Yet a recent survey revealed that we really don't have a lot of imagination when it comes to our gardens. The UK might contain some of the world's most prestigious gardens, but most of us have narrow borders on four sides of a rectangular lawn and a shed tucked away in a corner.

If you aspire to enter the world of obelisks, pergolas, decking and water features, or if you want to be able to tell your Acer Japonicum from your Zinnia Elegans, you probably need some help. So we've searched out a selection of gardening-related software packages and a few interesting websites.

In this review we have a selection of 3D garden design packages that allow you to take on a landscape design project and visualise how your garden will look before you build your first wall or plant your first shrub. It's far easier – and less expensive – to try out your ideas on a PC screen than to try them out for real in your garden.

To help you pick suitable plants for your garden and to get on top of all those confusing names, we have a handful of plant encyclopedias, including Geoff Hamilton's Plant Encyclopedia, the full version of which is on this month's cover disc. These useful packages include thousands of plant species and will help you choose plants to suit your soil type and habitat. Most also provide guidance on how to look after your plants.

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We also have a couple of more specialised packages, one to inspire your imagination, the other to provide help if you're interested in becoming self-sufficient by growing your own vegetables. Finally, the websites below provide resources from education to news and practical hints and tips.

Autumn may be approaching, but working on the garden isn't restricted to the summer months. Maintaining your garden is a year-round task so there's undoubtedly something you should be doing right now. And even if you decide to leave the bulk of the work until spring, a major redesign will need a lot of planning before you even think of taking a spade to the ground. So whether you plan to give your garden a facelift or your aspirations are more modest, there's no better time than now.

REVIEW GARDENING WEBSITE

Royal Horticultural Society

RATING ★★★★★

WEB www.rhs.org.uk

The Royal Horticultural Society does far more than arrange the Chelsea Flower Show, as its website reveals. First there's a searchable plant database, which is free, although the number of plants is limited unless you're an RHS member. You can search by criteria such as colour and seasons for extensive information and a photo.

The advice section includes topical articles that change regularly, a calendar that provides a checklist of things to be done in British gardens each month and a wealth of other information including popular topics, conservation and the environment, and garden design ideas. The site also has a What's On section with information on gardening and flower shows, gardens that are open to the public and a searchable list of events.



REVIEW GARDENING WEBSITE

BBC Gardening

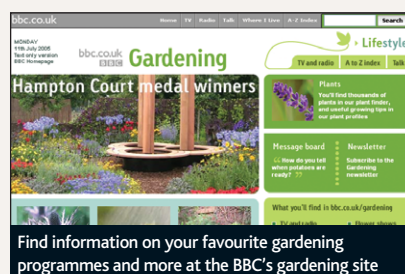
RATING ★★★★★

WEB www.bbc.co.uk/gardening

As it belongs to the BBC you might expect this site to focus on its TV and radio gardening programmes, and sections of the site are indeed dedicated to *Ground Force*, *Gardener's World* and other gardening programmes.

However, this isn't the extent of the BBC's site. There's a plant database, general advice, a section on garden design and something for beginners. Then there's an eight-part 'How to be a Gardener' course plus educational gardening projects, information and games for kids.

There are also competitions, articles on the UK's flower shows and a Today in Your Garden section. You can register for the BBC's gardening newsletter which will be emailed to you each time there's a major update to the website.



REVIEW GARDENING WEBSITE

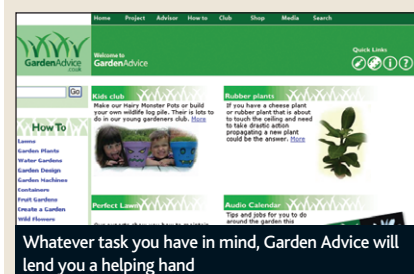
Garden Advice

RATING ★★★

WEB www.gardenadvice.co.uk

This site offers lots of advice for the gardener. Although this isn't all you'll find here, the most informative part is a section of tutorials covering some of the most common projects and problems. For example, among the 15 tutorials you'll find a section devoted to lawns, which divides into seven specific jobs including lawn rescue. Depending on the topic, you'll either be shown step-by-step instructions, each illustrated with a photograph, or an informative article.

All this information is free but there's more if you join the Garden Advice Club, which is also free. Members can ask gardening experts specific questions and also receive the World of Gardening CD-ROM, a weekly email newsletter and a printed magazine once a quarter.



REVIEW GARDENING SOFTWARE

GSP

Geoff Hamilton's 3D Garden Designer

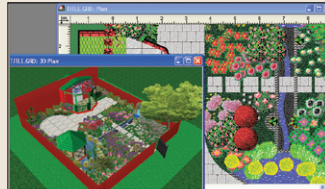
RATING ★★★★★

PRICE £6.99 inc VAT

SUPPLIER www.amazon.co.ukDETAILS www.gsp.cc

Geoff Hamilton's 3D Garden Designer is the easiest to use of the three design packages we've reviewed. The basic idea is that you put objects into your garden and then move them around and alter their sizes just as you would with any other drawing package. Then, having dropped everything into its correct position, you can take a look at your garden design in 3D, walking around it to view it from any angle. And unlike other CAD packages, you can see how your garden will look in any month of the year or roll forward in time to get an idea of how things will change as your plants grow.

The list of objects you can add is impressive. Included here are all the things you might want such as surfaces, fences, structures and lighting; you can even put animals and vehicles in your garden. Your house is, of course, the main element in your garden and, although there are half a dozen types of house and there's scope for customising it somewhat, they all look fairly American and you'd probably struggle to produce a convincing replica of your own home. There's also a plant encyclopedia which, while not rivaling the standalone plant encyclopedias, includes a database of 3,700 plants.



See how your new garden design will look before you buy your first plant

✓ Easy-to-use package means you'll be up and running in no time

✗ Lacks the sophistication of other garden design packages

REQUIREMENTS Windows 95/98/2000/Me/XP, 200MHz processor, 32MB RAM, 32MB disk space, 800x600 graphics

REVIEW GARDENING SOFTWARE

FAST TRAK

Punch Master Landscape Pro

RATING ★★★★★

PRICE £23 inc VAT

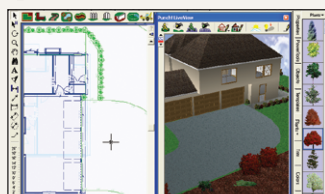
SUPPLIER www.amazon.co.ukDETAILS www.fasttrak.co.uk

Despite being offered by different publishers, this package and the 3D garden designer from Focus have a common heritage, both having been produced by Punch Software. Master Landscape Pro is certainly the more sophisticated, though, so we'll approach this by describing the main features it offers beyond Your 3D Garden Designer.

Many of the additional features relate more to the design of the house than the garden. For example, you can make provision for the electrics and the plumbing. One definite advantage is that you can now import AutoCAD plans, so if you already have an AutoCAD drawing of your house, you don't have to re-enter all that data manually as you would have to with Focus's software.

The other main additional feature is an animator that lets you create a movie of a walkthrough of your design. This is aimed at professional designers to present a design to a client, but it means you can share your ideas.

This software is feature-packed and offers lots to interest the house designer. However, despite all its advanced features, for those interested just in garden design the additional £13 probably doesn't represent money well spent.



It might not affect your garden but you can plan wiring changes to your house

✓ A very sophisticated piece of software

✗ Many advanced features concern house rather than garden design

REQUIREMENTS Windows 98/Me/2000/XP, Pentium processor, 64MB RAM, 1.4GB disk space, 800x600 graphics

REVIEW GARDENING SOFTWARE

FOCUS

Your 3D Garden Designer

RATING ★★★★★

PRICE £9.99 inc VAT

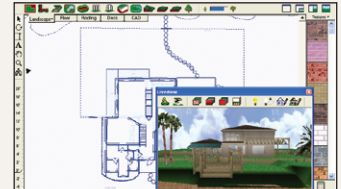
SUPPLIER www.johnlewis.comDETAILS www.focusmm.co.uk

Your 3D Garden Designer provides much the same features as Geoff Hamilton's 3D Garden Designer but adds a lot more features, despite costing just £3 more. The most

important additional facility is a full CAD-like interface. Whereas GSP lets you add predefined objects, this product allows you to define objects line-by-line, curve-by-curve or area-by-area. This means you can begin with a scale model of your home around which you design a garden.

In fact, if you really want to go to town, you can add all the internal walls and staircases and even populate it with furniture. Perhaps this is going a bit far, but it does mean that you can see how your new garden would look from any window in the house. In common with building-oriented CAD packages, you can generate a full list of materials showing how much of each material or how many plants you'll need. If you export this to a spreadsheet package, you can work out how much a job will cost.

A useful additional feature is a means of importing photographs. This way you can add detail such as a door that isn't included in the product's library right through to images of your house so you can truly customise your design.



A sophisticated design package at an excellent price

✓ CAD facilities let you put your own house in the picture

✗ Takes longer to learn than the entry-level packages

REQUIREMENTS Windows 98/Me/2000/XP, 100MHz Pentium processor, 16MB RAM, 910MB disk space, 800x600 graphics

REVIEW GARDENING SOFTWARE

GSP

Geoff Hamilton's Plant Encyclopedia

RATING ★★★★★

PRICE £6.99 inc VAT

SUPPLIER www.amazon.co.ukDETAILS www.gsp.cc

Geoff Hamilton's Plant Encyclopedia is an encyclopedia of 4,000 plants of all types, with a description, cultivation tips and a photo for each. Information such as the flowering season, favoured soil and moisture conditions are shown in tabular form.

There are major advantages compared to being presented with the same information in printed form. In particular, as well as being able to search for plants using their names (either common or Latin) as you would with a book, you can search by lots of other criteria. Want a plant that blooms in July, has red flowers, favours partial shade and grows no more than one metre tall? No problem – just enter these criteria on the search page and you'll be given a list of plants to scroll through.

One other feature is the ability to create lists – perhaps of the plants already in your garden or the plants you're thinking of buying – to print out or view as a slideshow. You can add a plant to a list by bookmarking its page while you're viewing it and create new lists by copying from existing lists. This might be a no frills-piece of software, but at this price you can't really go wrong.



Choose from 4,000 plants to find those that meet your requirements

✓ Excellent value for money

✗ Little more than a basic plant encyclopedia with search facilities

REQUIREMENTS Windows 95/98/Me/2000/XP, 100MHz processor, 32MB RAM, no disk space requirement (runs from CD), 1,024x768 graphics



REVIEW GARDENING SOFTWARE

FOCUS

Your Garden Encyclopedia

RATING ★★★★★

PRICE £9.99 inc VAT

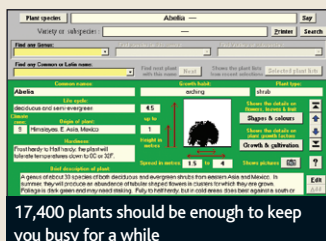
SUPPLIER www.johnlewis.comDETAILS www.focusmm.co.uk

With 17,400 plants – including all the ornamental plants you'd expect, plus wild flowers, mosses, vegetables and agricultural crops – this is an encyclopedia of epic proportions.

The encyclopedia allows you to search by plant name or lots of other criteria such as growing seasons, colour and size. For each plant the information presented – spread over a number of screens – includes the life cycle, growing habitat, plant type, country of origin, climatic zone, hardiness, shape and colour, plus a wealth of growth and cultivation advice. Photographs are available for about half the plants in the database.

There are also tools to help you plan your planting and advice on the care of your plants. The section on plant health lets you search for plant type or symptoms and gives advice on how to bring your ailing plants back to full health. In addition there's a huge selection of cultivation advice, as well as a season planner to tell you what you should be doing right now.

Finally, Your Garden Encyclopedia helps you become more knowledgeable about botany as there's educational material here too. If you want to know how a species relates to a genus and a family, this package will reveal all.



17,400 plants should be enough to keep you busy for a while

✓ Contains a vast number of plants

✗ The information is poorly presented

REQUIREMENTS Windows 98/Me/2000/XP, Pentium processor, 16MB RAM, 65MB disk space, 1,024x768 graphics

REVIEW GARDENING SOFTWARE

GNC

The Vegetable Gardener's Almanac

RATING ★★★★★

PRICE £35 inc VAT (CD);

£30 inc VAT (download)

SUPPLIER GNC 0113 255 1710

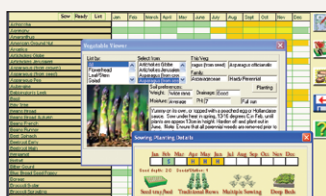
DETAILS www.thevga.co.uk

The Vegetable Gardener's Almanac (VGA) helps you plan and manage your vegetable garden by defining your plots, planning the beds within the plots and recording what you plant and harvest in each bed.

The VGA provides a range of tools. First there's a large list of crops for you to choose from. You can make your selection by name or you can tell the VGA to show you crops that are suitable for a given soil type, pH, shade, moisture or drainage. For each crop you are presented with basic details including planting or sowing and harvesting months plus detailed cultivation instructions.

You can then choose to sow or plant the crop in one of your beds. Later you can tell the VGA that you have transplanted, thinned, treated, harvested or cleared the crop, and this information is recorded in your crop history. Similarly you can record actions such as digging and treating the soil, which are then recorded in the bed history.

There's little point in growing vegetables unless you plan to eat them, so the VGA also has an extensive recipes section. All the recipes are vegetarian.



Bring your vegetable garden into the computer age with the VGA

✓ One of the few packages available for the keen vegetable gardener

✗ Quite expensive

REQUIREMENTS Windows 98/NT4/2000/XP, 400MHz processor, 32MB RAM, 17MB disk space, 800x600 graphics

REVIEW GARDENING SOFTWARE

COMPLETE GARDENS

Plant & Gardening Guide

RATING ★★★★★

PRICE £16 inc VAT

SUPPLIER www.amazon.co.ukDETAILS www.complete-gardens.co.uk

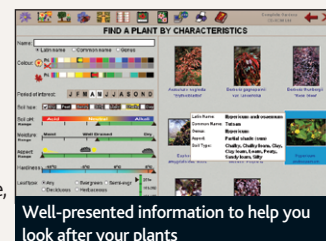
Like the other two encyclopedias here, this software includes a database of plants that can be searched by name or by a combination of characteristics.

Unlike the other packages, however, it also lets you search by plant use or interest and there are options such as autumn colours, berries and cottage-style gardens.

The database includes only 2,700 plants, but the package makes up for this in other ways. First, there's no shortage of photographs. Second, and most importantly, the emphasis is on the practical, so for each plant, there's information on planting, plant care, pruning, pests and diseases. The information is extensive – many plants include six pages on pruning alone.

The garden style guide includes 28 styles. Each style includes a photo and, as you move the pointer over the image, plants are highlighted and their names appear. Double-clicking a name takes you to its entry.

You can maintain lists of plants you want and plants you have, and a diary reminds you when your plants need attention. There are many educational articles and an online search facility for suppliers of plants on your wanted list.



Well-presented information to help you look after your plants

✓ No shortage of down-to-earth practical information

✗ Far fewer plants than other plant encyclopedias

REQUIREMENTS Windows 98/Me/XP, Pentium processor, 64MB RAM, 1.4GB disk space, 800x600 graphics

REVIEW GARDENING SOFTWARE

IDEAS FOR GARDENS

Ideas Genie

RATING ★★★★★

PRICE £40 inc VAT

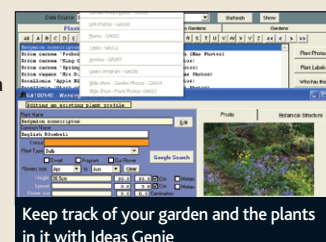
DETAILS www.ideasforgardens.com

Ideas Genie is unlike any of the other packages reviewed here. According to the supplier, the most commonly asked question is, "But what does it do?" and I asked the same question when I started using it. It has

elements in common with other packages here, most notably a database of plants, and as with the standalone plant encyclopedias you can search by various criteria such as soil type and plant size.

However, the emphasis is different. In Ideas Genie you're encouraged to keep your own records, so you can add to or edit the plant descriptions and add your own plants and photos either of plants on their own or in a garden setting. By swapping databases you can also exchange ideas with others. In fact, you can buy a selection of swap files for some well-known gardens (including the Lost Gardens of Heligan in Cornwall) for inspiration.

In addition to maintaining a database of plants, Ideas Genie also lets you document your garden. You can record what you've planted, where you bought it and much more. You can add your own care instructions and pruning schedules by adding links to Word documents, line drawings or web pages. **CS**



Keep track of your garden and the plants in it with Ideas Genie

✓ Plenty of scope for adding your own data and photographs

✗ By far the most expensive package here for the non-specialist gardener

REQUIREMENTS Windows 95/98/2000/Me/XP/NT, 90MHz Pentium processor, 64MB RAM, 57MB disk space, 800x600 graphics